Social Anthropology as Discourse

This paper is about a darkness; a profound darkness that lies beyond boundaries we are unable to cross, unable to define, and beyond which is silence, is death. We are unable to cross these boundaries (let us call them 'limits') except in death, for we live in the space defined by these limits; these same limits present obstacles at the extremities of our perception and experience. Or rather, there is a correlation between those limits and the experience of the space within those limits.

Such boundaries are not available for definition, as to define them would be to bring them within their own limits. Such boundaries must be left undefined if they are to limit; such limits are truly death, absence, silence. The space within, and defined by, these limits is characterised by life, presence, discourse, and it is to a consideration of this latter feature, viz discourse, that this paper will be addressed. Much effort will be expended to ensure that a fundamental distinction is recognised between discourse and that linguistic category language.

To the extent that linguists have seen in discourse a well-defined structure; have regarded discourse as a formal system for the transfer of a semantic content; in as much as linguists and philosophers have related sentences, utterances, speech acts, propositions, to some criteria of well-formedness or acceptability; more generally, to the extent that they have substituted an investigation or their own theoretical category language in place of an involvement with discourse, they have conspired to maintain those limits as thresholds of death, absence, silence. By making appeal to some external and arbitrary criteria of acceptability and light, they have invoked darkness and death as necessary correlates. More seriously, to the extent that others have made appeal to those procedures developed in linguistics for the study of language, for the investigation of other social phenomena, then they too should suffer the same indictment.

Let us suppose social anthropology.

Such a supposition is justified to the extent that social anthropology evidences itself. Social anthropology evidences itself in texts.

Let us suppose also that social anthropology is the study of texts. The texts which the social anthropologist studies are those general texts that represent the ever-shifting and necessarily internally productive interweavings of several constituent texts, each of which being dependent for its legitmacy and constituted only as the nexus of relations between texts. Social anthropology occupies precisely such a nexus. Perhaps the word 'text' conjures up the notion of a completed writing or an articulation that is finished; a 'dead stretch', or archive, available for study. As though by a detailed analysis it might be possible to trace connections between those constitutive texts and reconstitute the textual fabric which supports social and cultural life. It has commonly been imagined that the support and coherence of social action has been dependent on a fabric of regulations, a social structure, a code of procedure, rulings of acceptability, enjoying some inorganic authority situated variously above, or below, at least at some different level from

those events observed by the social anthropologist. It was as though the positivist and empirical sociology, dealing with the 'mechanical' relationships amongst events, had constituted a 'physics' of society; whilst social anthropology, with its repeated emphasis on conceptual 'models' and intellectual orientations underlying social actions, had presented a 'meta-physics'. Or better: is a grammar of social action; a programme determining the arrangement of those observed events at the 'level' of observation only, or does the significance of such events depend, partly or wholly, on some transformational history originating in some pre-conscious, atemporal, deep-structural, conceptual framework? It must surely be said that social anthropology is a metaphysics of social intercourse.

It is necessary only to recognise that Social Anthropology evidences itself as discourse, as statements recognisably social anthropological, which, in their materiality, constitute the text of Social Anthropology. Social Anthropology is nothing other than those material statements which are articulated in the discursive field of Social Anthropology. Social Anthropology fulfils no underlying and necessary prediction. It is absolutely text. No purpose would be served in undertaking an analysis of all those statements which together constitute this discursive field with a view to recovering essential and distinctive features, either in subject matter or in style of articulation; neither could appeal be made to some internal dynamic which drives this discourse along. As is the case in all discursive fields, it must be recognised that Social Anthropology does not constitute a discrete set of statements. Any attempt to so delineate Social Anthropology must then be seen as ill-founded.

Linguists and logicians with an interest in language, formal semanticists and grammarians, regard their recorded corpus of utterances ('performance' - Chomsky, 1965:4) as representing a sample of an infinite 'competence' (Chomsky, 1965:4), i.e. that set of utterances which might be 'generated' by the grammar of that natural language; as those propositions which might be compatible with the corpus; as those other sentences which might be regarded as true in relation to some external universe of interpretation or semantic structure. In each case it is by reference to some external framework that a plethora of potential sentences, propositions, or speech acts, might be predicted. From a small and finite corpus of examples linguists and logicians have attempted to construct that infinite set of sentences, propositions, or speech acts, which a competent native speaker would recognise as 'well-formed', 'correct', or 'grammatical'. In terms of such linguistic analysis it has been assumed that the sentences which comprise 'performance' imply, or carry with them, or indirectly refer to, that infinite set of sentences which is 'competence'; point to those possible, more immanent sentences which so far remain beneath the surface of material discourse.

The material sentences and speech acts have thus been regarded as external representatives of an interpretive structure which resides beneath material representation of language. Researchers who have undertaken to analyse a finite sample of this material performance have repeatedly, and in various fashions, attempted to reconstruct this hidden, or disguised, interpretive structure; have attempted to make possible the animation of the remainder of those statements which,

in that they each refer to that same interpretive structure, are compatible with that previously recorded performance. The linguist is concerned to provide for the materialisation of that plethora of sentences, propositions, speech acts, which might provide an exhaustive description of this interpretive structure; or rather, might allow for the realisation of that infinite set of immanent performances which populate a level beneath the surface of material discourse. A concept of linguistic 'levels' is implicit in all such linguistic analyses. Beneath the surface of materiality, and taken as residing alternately in the individual or a collective sub-conscious, is that plenitude of sentences (syntactically, or semantically, correct) or logically compatible propositions; that superabundance of well-formed structures. By promising such a set of possible sentences ('competence' - Chomsky) it has proved possible to trace a unity between those sentences which, in terms of such a presupposition have been chosen to enjoy a material existence; have broken through the threshold of materiality.

A major purpose of this paper is to suggest that [illegible] the positing and subsequent exploration of linguistic structures, whether syntactic, semantic, or phonologically based, merely enables the description of a well-lighted terrain. By establishing truth, meaningfulness, well-formedness, as though a priori limits of acceptability, an a priori situated both in a different space and in a different time from those acceptable utterances or propositions or speech acts, it is as though the succession of acceptable utterances merely provided further illumination of that frame of reference previously defined by the limits of acceptability.

A savage consequence of such methodological assumptions has been the subjection and enslavement of several generations of linguists to the search for and providing account of the 'meaning' of utterances; the 'meaning' being that fraction of the extra-linguistic structure or framework which that utterance was said to illuminate. When faced with problems of non-correspondence and irregularity several researchers were led to appeal to such notions as 'context' and 'situation' as necessary qualifications. To the extent that they are based upon criteria external to the material utterance, proposition, speech act, all such semantic theories and theories of meaning must be regarded as theories of reference; in as much as only 'acceptable' utterances are said to refer, so is language characterised as that procedure which renders possible a description of that well-lighted terrain; to the extent that our theoretical constructions operate as criteria of acceptability, be they generative procedures such as grammars, or referential frameworks such as semantic structure or universe of interpretation, they demonstrate a sociological presupposition of the 'norm'; implicit in such procedures is a category of 'standard practice' with its corresponding category of 'deviance'.

Thus there is a danger that our theoretical constructions might operate as no more than criteria of acceptability; that they will assume a status as guarantors of truth, meaningfulness, well-formedness; a field of reference which, being outside of historical time, is in danger of becoming established as a priori. Nor will it be sufficient for us to demonstrate that particular theoretical constructions are to be situated in history; that their emergence and articulation both correspond to and are synonymous with a particular historical instance;

that the irruption of such a perspective is not to be equated with the arbitrary workings of a creative subject, or genius; that successive or 'revolutionary' theoretical generalisations are not the works of visionaries or those who lived 'before their time'.

The genuis has been taken as that individual who animates the empty forms of language; pointing to, or indicating, a field of meanings, a semantic structure, a conceptual framework, a cognitive system, leaving lesser mortals to make it explicit through words. In rejecting such a notion Foucault implicitly abandons those philosophical themes in which discourse (wrongly assumed to be synonymous with language) is seen as an activity performed by individuals, be it writing or reading; a system of exchange, in which discourse (language) is no more than a set of signs at the disposal of the signifier (cf. Levi-Strauss, 1945).

The significance of a statement does not depend upon any referent external to that statement. This implies that we forsake those epistemological categories and linguistic or philosophical unities, once regarded as a priori, but which are now seen as no more than temporary methodological aids. It is precisely these apparently age-old categories that must be questioned; those pre-formed syntheses that must be suspended. Upon suspending those groupings, which we were in danger of regarding as God-given, it becomes necessary to consider in terms of which other criteria more clearly defined unities might be established. Having dismissed the category 'language' as presenting an unnecessary theoretical obstacle, our work is no longer to be regarded, nor referred to, as linguistic.

Such linguistic analyses as we shall review offer no account of the emergence of a particular sentence, proposition, etc., at its particular instance; no effort is made to provide account of why any particular structure is materialised at a particular instance, rather than any other. In fact, for such linguistic analysis such an account would be unnecessary. A rational unity is proposed amongst sentences in terms of their origin, implying that with any linguistic performance a whole set of connections at the level of pre-material immanence; an echo reverberates between the 'not-yet-said'; a resonance reactivates a whole syntactic, semantic, and logical competence.

By always referring language to a framework outside of (or underlying) discourse, philosophers of language and structuralist-generative linguists have denied significance to the materiality of sentences, utterances, etc.; in considering only those linguistic categories which together comprise their theoretical construct, 'language', they have regarded linguistic events merely as thought clad in signs and made visible by words. In accepting such an account one is faced with the problem of determining the origin of successive frameworks of reference; of accounting for the indisputable fact that enunciative formulations undergo historical change.

Any discursive formation is no more than that set of statements which have been articulated and so define those formations. A discursive formation is defined as that series of statements which constitute it. Such a proposition amounts to a suspension of all references and appeals to unities and continuities established on

the basis of either an external, formal criterion, or a prior classification of subject matter. It must be noted that the acceptance of any such prior classification was tantamount to condemning discourse (as was the category of language) to an eternal role of impotent commentary; a demand that we should regard discourse (language) as but a passive medium by the use of which man is able to articulate his experiences of the philosophical category of the given; a denial of the capacity of discourse to produce objects and concepts; more generally, that we undertake an analysis of the theoretical category language, for which procedure common sense provides an adequate principle of verification (pace A.J. Ayer), rather than to involve ourselves in a generative discourse.

The significance of a material statement is not to be assessed in its own right, as a discrete event. Whereas by making reference to some extra-linguistic authority an isolated sentence might be classified as grammatically-correct, a single proposition as logically true or false, a statement gains its significance in terms of its position, vis a vis other contemporary statements; in relation to those other statements which together comprise a discursive formation. The unity amongst those statements which constitute a discursive formation is not founded upon a common reference to some extra-linguistic framework. A discursive framework is no more than those statements which constitute it.

Although in terms of such an epistemology, or rather non-epistemology, there are no longer grounds for claiming an undisturbed continuity of development in a discursive field (neither by reference to some external and necessary framework or procedure, nor by tracing tenuous logical implications between successive statements), yet the never-stable network of relations which constitute a discursive formation, necessitates a degree of systematisation. The significance of such a proposition is that although it is possible to use the terminology of system, yet it is an open system. It is now possible to argue against those structuralist writers, who, following in the phenomenologist framework, propose a unity amongst natural phenomena corresponding to an essential structuring principle in the human intellect which investigates nature; it becomes possible to criticise those other writers who have proclaimed a necessary structure in the development of history.

But having argued in favour of suspending all those external frames of reference in accordance with which a sentence, or utterance, might be judged acceptable, meaningful, well-formed; notions by appeal to which unities or continuities might be posited between linguistic structures separated across space or through time; not allowing ourselves the convenience and reassurance of an a priori rationality situated either in the enquiring subject or the object of his enquiry, several severe limitations might still be noted on the production of statements. Having suspended such external criteria for unities and continuities, yet there are no grounds for regarding each material performance as a discrete event, totally unrelated to all other either preceding or successive verbal events. How then might it be possible to provide account of such a degree of regularity?

Having suspended all reference to both rational external and anthropologistic functions and limitations on the production of

statements, it would appear that man has available an infinite potential for producing statements; that it is man's 'natural' inclination to let this potential be realised; to allow this discourse to spread out in every conceivable direction, in search of the limits of discursive possibility. It would imply that, beyond the limitations on the production of statements, there is some expansive, limitless field of discourse which has been repressed and kept silent, which might be restored to speech when these limitations are abolished.

To hold such an opinion would be to accept the 'existence' of an 'unthought' or an 'unsaid' being made available for materialisation through articulation; would be to revert back to the position from which discourse (then language) was seen as consisting only of signs for objects, concepts, or whatever; would be to revert back to that position from which we have struggled so hard to escape, viz that philosophical standpoint from which words and statements were seen only as several disguises for concealing a reality that resided elsewhere; a philosophy founded on the central principle of the 'founding subject' as the originator of the several epistemological frameworks, semantic structures, cognitive systems. Outside of all time all he need do is indicate a field of meanings and let others make it explicit through words. In such a philosophical framework, language was seen simply as an activity performed by individuals - reading, writing, exchange; was regarded as a set of signs at the disposal of the signifier; a means of articulating that which was first of all thought; a function of impotent commentary on a theoretical 'given'.

But surely, you might say, simply to have a philosophy of language which denies discourse the power you say it has, is not, in itself, sufficient to emasculate such discourse. To refuse to accept that the mule will kick is hardly sufficient evidence when the opposite proves to be the case. It is true. One is right to protest. Such philosophical limitations might pose problems for analysis; might raise obstacles to successful exegesis, yet would not deny material discourse its capacity to produce. Two points are raised here: firstly, and in fear of flogging a horse that has been dead for the past several pages; by consistently referring sentences and propositions to some kind of system situated at a different 'level' to that of the material sentences, etc., philosophers of language have been unable to consider the possibility of the materiality of statements being productive. Secondly, and closely related to the first point; upon surveying the research undertaken in the field of linguistics or in the philosophy of language, we note that there has been a continual emphasis on searching 'underneath', or 'behind', the materiality of language, in search of some principle of organisation; on referring the material elements, be they morphemes, words, or classificatory particles, to some 'reality' outside of language. Such analytical techniques reflect a more general philosophical thematic, concomitant with an all-pervasive 'will to knowledge', or rather, 'will to truth'. (Foucault, 1971). The restrictions and limitations on the production of discourse arise primarily as a result of this 'will to truth' having been institutionalised.

It must be noted that each statement must be recognised as a discrete event; can be distinguished from all other statements either

in terms of its material composition, or the site of its articulation in time and space. Yet there are conditions under which such statements might be said to be repeatable. These conditions correspond to those categories which we have taken such trouble to reject; categories of grammaticality, meaningfulness, logicality. In terms of such categories sentences, utterances, etc. may be classified as well-formed or ill-formed, true or false, acceptable or unacceptable. Now institutions are founded upon and maintain, produce, in fact are nothing more than, a collection of sentences, propositions, etc. which together articulate a field of reference external to those sentences and propositions, etc. Precisely in terms of such a referential criterion institutions are able to decide on the significance of 'novel' sentences, propositions, and the like, and thus pass judgement as to the 'acceptability' of the same. Institutions are responsible for the division of the total field of discourse into disciplines, subject areas; by mistakenly substituting language for discourse institutions have assumed for themselves an authority to exclude those sentences and propositions, or rather statements, which, in terms of their self-defining frame of reference, are ill-formed or insignificant, improper or meaningless. Authority is indeed vested in institutions.

There is a temptation which must be resisted. It might appear that the limitations and restrictions to which reference has been made are constraints directed against the individual; are insidious limitations on the creative capacity of the philosophical subject; present some form of epistemological obstacle, maintained by the 'establishment', and which only the genius can overcome. It may be comforting to imagine that, were such obstacles removed, each individual would be able to materialise such rich notions that remain as yet unsaid. Such romanticism has no place in this work. The limitations which have been outlined are limitations and restrictions on the potentiality of the discourse, not on some ill-defined and frankly speculative notion of 'creative subject'.

Suspending any search for a truth value, or a meaning, hidden within the text; no longer analysing what is said in search of 'what is said'; regarding each statement not merely as the arbitrary projection from a field of the initially thought through the threshold of materiality, there are no grounds for claiming that material statements (written or spoken) conceal or disguise the intentions of a creative subject. Hence all appeals to a unity or continuity amongst statements based upon the presupposition of the rational workings of the human intellect, or a logic of the pre-conscious, might also be suspended.

The site of such a unity is not, however, presupposed. Such a unity might be founded on the use of words or propositions; based on appeal to syntactic, semantic, or phonological structures, or on the ratiocinations of formal logic. Where such an appeal is not altogether satisfactory then there is a further appeal to hidden unities. It must be borne in mind that the presupposition of such a unity is a procedural obligation for the historian of ideas, as it is also for the idealist philosopher and linguistic analyst. A principle of cohesion must be found, at any level from the most obvious and banal to the most ill-founded and tenuous. Such speculative unities might be founded on logical non-contradictions beneath the syntactic and semantic ambiguities, or through analogy and symbolism by means of

an imaginary thematic. In such fashion have these researchers attempted to establish rational unities amongst sentences, propositions, and speech acts, both through time and across discipline boundaries.

A claim is being made that our discourse articulates beyond the limits of any structuralism; that the categories of discursive formation, system of formation, etc. are not susceptible to structural analyses, and that attention must now be focused upon the raw fact of the statements' materiality, rather than on the elucidation of some hidden frame of reference. Rather than constructing, on the basis of recorded data, some form of generative system which might produce a larger corpus compatible with that already examined, it is recommended that attention be shifted to a consideration of the instance, or circumstances, under which one particular statement appears rather than any other.

It must be emphasized that there is to be no interpretation of the texts. Recorded statements are no longer to be seen as providing evidence either for objects of the 'real' world (however this qualifier might be understood), or the intentions of an author. Nor are they to be regarded as data for the construction of a history. It has been mentioned how several restrictions operate on the production of statements; how the tendency of discursive elements to expatiate throughout the whole field of discourse in general is controlled by institutions and authorities of discourse, in addition to more general philosophical presuppositions and themes.

Some might experience an immediate temptation to begin the construction of a 'new' history based on a consideration of such limitations as might be evinced by those recorded statements, found in books, official records, novels, and philosophical treatises; in short, upon a consideration of the archives. Does not the question spring to mind: would it not be possible to trace a history of those constantly shifting limitations on the truth of our human subjectivity which has, for all time, struggled for free-expression? In this interpretation of the text the material statements are once more regarded as the mere surface of the true; that hidden beneath this mantle is a profound and eternal truth that need only to be hinted at to be immediately recognised. It is precisely these speculative and ideational temptations which must be resisted.

Mike Taylor

References

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